

CREMATION: WHAT DOES GOD THINK?

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In a book on the subject of Christian funerals, a writer gives the following advice regarding cremation:

“Personally, the minister may or may not approve of such proceedings. Privately, he is free to hold any opinion that he will. But officially he should keep an open mind. In the Christian religion there is nothing that frowns upon cremation or requires burial.”

Is this sound advice? Is cremation a matter of Christian liberty? In certain places land space is so crowded that burial plots are very expensive and in some cases there are efforts by the governments to discourage burial in preference to cremation. That this problem has become acute in Singapore is referred to in the following official statement made by the Bible Presbyterian Church of Singapore in May, 1987--

“1. There is an increasing number of cremations in Singapore even amongst Christians. 2. It is quite evident that our Government favours cremation by improving the facilities of the existing crematoria and columbaria, and by increasing the cost of burial while keeping down the cost of cremation. 3. Some non-Bible Presbyterian pastor have spoken and written in favour of cremation and have officiated at cremations while some non-Bible Presbyterian churches have even built columbaria. 4. Those who favour cremation claim it is more hygienic, cleaner and cheaper. 5. They see cremation as a convenient form of disposal of the dead. 6. Cremation does away with burial plots that need to be upkeep and falls in line with our Government's stress on strategic land use” (*Far Eastern Beacon*, July 1987, p. 4).

In light of this situation, the Bible Presbyterian Church of Singapore has taken a clear and commendable stand for the Word of God and against the practice of cremation. We have included their statement on this issue in the back of this booklet.

CREMATION INCREASING IN NORTH AMERICA

The number of cremations in North America is increasing dramatically. In 1975, only 6% of the people who died were cremated. By 2007 this had increased to 34%. In Hawaii, the percentage of dead that are cremated is 66%, Washington 64%, Nevada 65%, Arizona 59%, Oregon 63.7%, Montana 59%, Alaska 58%, Colorado 56%, Maine 53%, California 52%, Florida 51%, Wyoming 46%. (The states with the least percentage of cremations per death are in the “Bible Belt” -- Alabama at 9.5%, Mississippi and Tennessee 10%, Kentucky 12%, Louisiana 15%.)

The 2005 statistics for Canada are as follows: British Columbia 79%, New Brunswick 61%, Alberta 59%, Manitoba 53%, Nova Scotia 50%, Quebec 47%, Ontario 47%, and Saskatchewan 46%.

According to the cover story in the December 5, 1995, issue of *USA Today*, the rising acceptance of cremation has coincided with a drop in “religious barriers to cremation.” It is interesting that this secular newspaper noticed the connection between religion and cremation. The disposal of the body after death is a religious matter. One’s beliefs will determine such choices. Historically, burial has been a testimony of faith in the bodily resurrection. Historically, cremation has been practiced among those, such as Hindus, who deny the bodily resurrection and who believe in reincarnation. Historically, wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ has found acceptance, pagan practices such as cremation have been rejected. The increase in cremation in North American society has paralleled the wholesale rejection of the Bible in this same society. As paganism increases its steely hold on American and Canadian hearts, cremation becomes increasingly popular.

THE METHOD OF CREMATION IN THE WEST

The following is excerpted from *USA Today*, December 5, 1995:

“The three-hour process of burning a body and grinding it to small fragments often takes place away from loved ones’ eyes. The body, usually dressed but stripped of all jewelry, slides into “retort”—a brick-lined oven that looks like a big bread oven.

“Pacemakers are removed because their batteries can explode at high temperatures. Silicone breast implants, which can’t be removed, are creating problems for crematory operators who say remains often stick to the melting silicone.

“The gas or oil-fired ovens are heated to about 1,700 degrees. Although often called ashes, the remains are actually bone fragments. These are swept with a giant hoe-like scraper from the bottom of the retort and put in a container to cool down. Any large debris, such as dental crowns or hip prostheses, is removed.

“Everything is then ground to granule-sized pieces. The whole process takes about three hours. The result is about six pounds of remains compact enough to fit in a shoe box.”

For the following reasons, we are convinced that the practice of cremation should be rejected by God’s people:

CREMATION HAS A HEATHEN ORIGIN AND PURPOSE

Cremation, as just described and as practiced today in the more technically advanced nations, no longer has the physical ghastliness associated with cremations performed in the less developed parts of the world. The modern method, as we have seen, incorporates the use of an exceedingly hot incinerator which reduces the body to ashes quickly, and the entire process is done out of the view of loved ones and the public.

Not so in places like South Asia, where we have lived and served Christ for nearly 20 years. It would seem that any Christian who could stand beside the “holy” River Bagmati in Kathmandu, Nepal, and observe the burning of the body of a Hindu and the heathen death rituals, would cast aside in repulsion every thought of cremation being an acceptable Christian practice.

Some years ago, I stood three or so feet from a burning corpse with a missionary pastor from Singapore and his wife who were visiting us. The head was already burnt beyond recognition and the skull was split open due to internal expansion from the heat of the fire. The lower legs and feet were unscorched, as they were protruding from the pile of burning wood and stubble upon which the man's body lay. The professional Hindu burners were poking the body from time to time to keep the members in the fire and adding stubble and wood as needed. The bones were contracting and popping; the bodily organs were frying and the juices sizzling in the intense heat.

My wife, a nurse with experience working with lepers in a hospital in a very remote part of Asia and in an intensive care ward in the United States, stood with another friend observing the ghastly sight from a distance, unwilling to come closer. The air for a hundred yards or more was filled with the unmistakable, stomach-turning stench of burning human flesh. When the fire had burnt most of the body, the ashes and remaining members were shoved into the river.

This is cremation as has been practiced by heathen religions for centuries, but without the sanitization adopted in more technically advanced areas.

Would you treat your loved ones so? Is this an acceptable Christian practice? No sir, cremation is a heathen practice. It is of heathen origin and serves heathen purposes. Why do the Hindus and those of other heathen religions cremate? It has a connection with their belief in reincarnation.

There is nothing Christian about cremation. We were standing that day, as I have many other times, observing cremation in the surroundings from which the practice arose--idolatrous, Christless heathenism.

GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS PRACTICED BURIAL

At the outset let me answer an objection sometimes made at this point. The objection is, "Yes, God's people in the Bible practiced burial. The example is clearly there. But are we bound to follow these examples; they are not direct commands?" The answer is given in Romans 15:4. "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning ..." And again in 1 Corinthians 10:11 we read, "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come." In these passages God is telling us that we are to follow the Bible's examples as well as its direct instructions.

Following are just a few examples.

Abraham was buried (Genesis 25:8-10)
Sarah was buried (Genesis 23:1-4)
Rachel was buried (Genesis 35:19-20)
Isaac was buried (Genesis 35:29)
Jacob was buried (Genesis 49:33; 50:1-13)
Joseph was buried (Genesis 50:26)
Joshua was buried (Joshua 24:29-30)
Eleazar was buried (Joshua 24:33)

Samuel was buried (1 Samuel 25:1)
David was buried (1 Kings 2:10)
John the Baptist was buried (Matthew 14:10-12)
Ananias and Sapphira were buried (Acts 5:5-10)
Stephen was buried (Acts 8:2)

EVEN WHEN BURIAL WAS DIFFICULT

Even in difficult circumstances God's people in olden days practiced burial. For example, Joseph's body was kept for over 400 years in Egypt and then carried through the 40 years of wilderness wanderings before being buried in Palestine, the Promised Land. We read of this in Genesis 50:24-25; Exodus 13:19 and Joshua 24:32.

How much simpler it would have been for the Israelites to have cremated Joseph, then carried his ashes with them in a tiny container! But this they refused to do. Joseph, a follower of the one true God, a man who looked forward to the bodily resurrection, was given an honorable burial. From this important example, we learn that even if cremation is less expensive or easier than burial, it is still to be rejected, as the Israelites rejected the economical and simpler way to carry Joseph to the Promised Land.

BURIAL LOOKS FORWARD TO RESURRECTION

"For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body" (Rom.8:22-23). See also 1 Cor. 15:20-23; 2 Cor. 5:1 and 1 Cor. 15:51-57.

The reason God's people have always been careful to practice burial is not difficult to understand. We believe in a bodily resurrection. Yes, the buried body will decompose in time. Yes, there are occasions in which Christians die in ways which render burial impossible--in the sinking of ships, in house fires, etc. But when at all possible we bury. Why the trouble? Because it is our certain hope that the same individual will be raised in the same body, only changed.

The physical body is called the seed for the resurrection body. When planted, a seed decomposes, and the new plant comes forth. The Bible uses this to illustrate resurrection.

"But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain; But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body. ... So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power; It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body" 1 Cor. 15:35-44

Notice that the Apostle answers those who would ask how it is possible for God to raise again a decomposed body. The terminology used by the Holy Spirit in this passage is that of husbandry--planting seed. The farmer does not destroy his seed; he plants it, then from the decaying seed comes

forth the new life. Such is burial and the resurrection. When we bury a Christian loved one, we are planting the seed for the resurrection body! It is a powerful testimony of our unwavering faith in God's Word regarding the promise of bodily resurrection.

Contrast heathenism. They have no such knowledge or hope. The Hindus and Buddhists, for example, believe in reincarnation. Yes, they believe in a human soul which is distinct from the body. But they do not believe that soul, once departed from the body at death, will be resurrected in any relation whatsoever to the first body. Rather they believe the soul will be reincarnated in another entirely unrelated body, or into a non-physical sphere of existence.

Were those who were buried in Old Testament times buried with a knowledge of resurrection? Yes, God's people have had some knowledge of a bodily resurrection from the earliest days. The book of Job is commonly considered to be the oldest book in the Bible. There is no mention in the book of Job concerning Israel, or Jerusalem, or Palestine, the temple or the Jewish kingdom, and it is most likely that Job was a God-fearing man who lived in the days prior to Abraham. Yet we see in Job 19:25-27 that this ancient man of God had thorough knowledge of the bodily resurrection.

"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me."

God's people have always buried their dead with this magnificent hope burning in their hearts. "We will see that brother or sister again in that same body, only changed, glorified!" Hallelujah! Only through the death and shed blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can we have this certain hope. He has taken upon Himself on the cross the punishment for our sins, carried our sins into the grave, and rose again in eternal triumph three days later. When an individual thoroughly acknowledges his sinfulness before God, repents (changes his mind about and desires to turn from his sinful, self-willful life) and receives Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior, the sin debt is paid, and eternal life and glory is promised from God the Father. Part of this heritage in Christ is the glorified resurrection body.

GOD PRACTICES BURIAL

Another reason I believe burial is the will of God for His people is seen in the fact that God Himself buried Moses: "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day" (Deuteronomy 34:5,6).

CREMATION IS A SIGN OF GOD'S CURSE

Throughout the Bible the destruction of a human body or of an object by fire is used as a sign of divine wrath. Consider with me some examples:

The example of Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Peter 2:6)

The example of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1,2)
The example of the men who rebelled with Korah (Numbers 16:35)
The example of idols (Exodus 32:20; Deut. 7:25; 2 Kings 10:26; 1 Chron. 14:12)
The example of magic books (Acts 19:18-19)
The example of unsaved cast into the lake of fire for eternal punishment (Revelation 20:15)

FOR A PERSON NOT TO HAVE A PROPER BURIAL WAS CONSIDERED A DISHONOR

A key example of this is Jezebel who, because of her wickedness, was eaten of dogs (1 Kings 21:23-24). Again, we read of the Midianites “which perished at Endor: they became as dung for the earth” (Psalm 83:9-10). Shall we dishonor our loved ones by failing to give them a proper Christian burial?

THE CHRISTIAN’S BODY BELONGS TO GOD; IT IS NOT OURS TO DESTROY BY FIRE OR BY ANY OTHER MEANS

“What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

When something does not belong to me, but is only borrowed from its rightful owner, I certainly have no right to destroy it. If the master destroys his own possession, that is his prerogative, but such does not belong with the borrower. This is true of death and the Christian’s body. The body is not ours to desecrate or destroy. If God chooses to allow a Christian to die in a house fire, that is His prerogative. But the Christian himself has no such freedom to chose to destroy his own body. And Romans 14:8 reminds us that this is true both in life and in death! “... whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.”

GOD HAS PLAINLY CALLED CREMATION WICKEDNESS

“Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime” (Amos 2:1).

THE LORD JESUS WAS BURIED, AND HE IS OUR GREAT EXAMPLE

“Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. ... There laid they Jesus therefore. ...” (John 19:38-42)

Just as the Lord Jesus Christ was buried in certainty that He would rise again on the third day according to the Scriptures, even so is the Christian said to rest at death. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, as the Apostle Paul testified (2 Cor. 5:9 and Phil. 1:21-23). The body without the spirit is dead (James 2:26). The dead body sleeps in the grave while the redeemed soul waits in glory for the great resurrection day.

In light of the above Bible facts, the statement, “In the Christian religion there is nothing that frowns upon cremation or requires burial,” proves to be untrue. Of course we cannot force people either to bury or not to bury. And we know that the manner of one’s burial does not affect his resurrection.

But we do believe these things are important, and we are convinced that Christian leaders and God’s people should patiently share these truths in the churches and with friends. In these days of widespread apostasy and doctrinal confusion a clear voice in all matters of Bible teacher is urgently needed.

Isn’t it wonderful that in Christ Jesus the sting of death has been removed! We no longer must live in fear of death, but in hope of the dawning of that Perfect Day! Let this be the Christian’s testimony: If I die before Christ returns, lay my body to rest in quiet sleep to await that Day. Please don’t treat me as the heathen treat their loved ones.

WHAT IF MY LOVED ONE ALREADY HAS BEEN CREMATED?

Many sincere Christians have approached me after reading this book or after merely seeing the title of the cover, and have expressed deep concern about the status of their loved ones who have already been cremated.

I always remind these friends that the way the body is disposed of has no eternal consequences. While I strongly believe cremation is contrary to Scripture and is therefore not something a Christian should do, the most important question is whether or not the deceased had trusted Jesus Christ as his or her Savior, whether or not that one had been born again.

The question of whether someone is buried or cremated is a decision which primarily affects the living rather than the dead. Burial witnesses to our faith in the bodily resurrection, but the witness is to the living. Burial honors the body of the deceased, but this honor, again, is something which relates largely to the living who witness the burial, because the soul of the deceased has already departed.

The soul of the saved person goes to be with Christ immediately upon death (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8; 2 Tim. 4:6; Lk. 23:43). The soul of the lost man or woman descends to hell immediately upon death (Lk. 16:22-23; Rev. 20:13). That which is done to the body after death does not affect the soul’s condition nor the future resurrection.

Thus, if a loved one has been cremated, it’s not something to fret about. It is over and done with and has no eternal consequences. If that loved one was saved through the blood of Jesus Christ, the fact that he was cremated certainly didn’t keep him out of heaven!

A similar situation arises with those Christians who have loved ones who have determined to be cremated. Many in such a situation have asked me what they should do about this matter. An

example would be a wife whose unsaved husband wants to be cremated. Another example is a son or daughter whose parent wants to be cremated.

The only thing that can be done is to try to explain with that loved one the things we have shared in this study. We have seen many Christians change their mind about cremation after reading this booklet. Again, the most important issue is whether or not that loved one is born again and is ready to meet God. Sometimes the very discussion of this topic can offer an opportunity to share the Gospel. One man who was dying in a hospital was saved after his sister read this booklet to him and discussed his need to be saved.

May the Lord encourage your heart and give you wisdom in dealing with these sensitive but crucial subjects with your loved ones.

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